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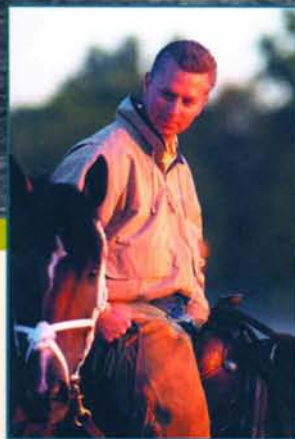
**A WORTHY
DISTINCTION FOR
NEEDLES**

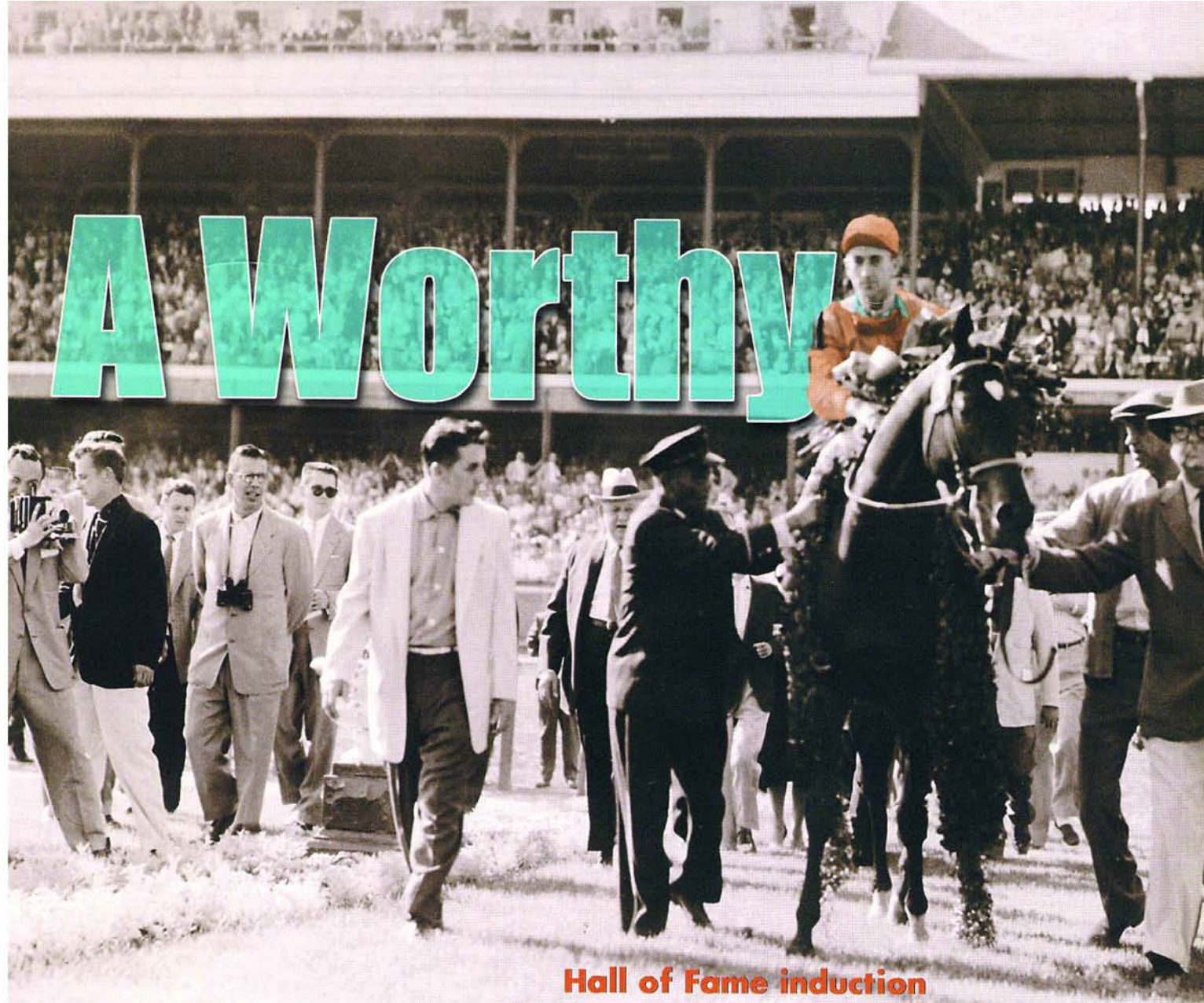


**Summerfield:
Success in
Life & Work**



**Todd Pletcher:
Fast Track
to the Top**





Hall of Fame induction ceremonies are set for August 7 in Saratoga Springs, N.Y. for HORSE OF YESTERYEAR NEEDLES, Florida's first ever Kentucky Derby winner and national champion.

BY MICHAEL COMPTON

It is a date with immortality long overdue. In May, Florida's Thoroughbred community collectively echoed "It's about time," when the announcement was made in Louisville, Ky., that Florida's most popular champion—Needles—would be enshrined into racing's prestigious Hall of Fame at the National Museum of Racing in Saratoga Springs, N.Y.

The storied Florida-bred's long awaited honor as Horse of Yesteryear was welcome news to the state's Thoroughbred breeders

DISTINCTION



and owners. Bred in Marion County by William Leach on ground that is now Ocala Stud, Needles raced for the D & H Stable of partners Jack Dudley and Bonnie Heath. The longtime friends and business associates purchased the 1953 son of Ponder—Noodle Soup, by Jack High, privately in 1955 on the advice of their legendary trainer Hugh Fontaine.

“We were so fortunate to have Hugh,” Bonnie Heath remembered. “Jack and I were very young in this business at the time and Hugh made the decisions on managing Needles’ career. Jack and I were young but we were seasoned enough not to second guess Hugh.”

Carrying the orange and blue colors of D & H Stable, Needles went on to conquer the racing world

in 1955 and 1956, earning champion honors at ages two and three. His racetrack exploits firmly planted the state on the industry’s breeding map and sparked interest in Central Florida as a breeding ground for future champions.

While a community victory for Florida’s Thoroughbred industry, the Hall of Fame announcement was especially sweet for the people responsible for Needles’ success.

“This is a great day for Florida and a great day for Bonnie Heath Farm,” said Bonnie Heath III, who was 6-years-old when his father’s colorbearer became the first Florida-bred in history to win the Kentucky Derby. “He was a very special horse and this honor is long, long overdue.”

NEEDLES (opposite page) being led into the Churchill Downs winner’s circle following his triumphant run in the 1956 Kentucky Derby.



**HUGH FONTAINE
and BONNIE HEATH.**

racing lore and attained greatness far and beyond any Florida Thoroughbred before him. In the weeks leading up to the Derby, Needles' colorful and well-chronicled character was on display for all the racing world to witness.

During training hours he often put on an entertaining show for the railbirds—demonstrating time and again that he was his own boss. If he wasn't in the mood to work, it required two or three stable hands, his regular rider Dave Erb, and Fontaine to

Altho ugh Needles would make a name for himself as a famed stretch runner at three, he was surprisingly precocious at two in 1955. He captured six of 10 starts as a juvenile, including the Hopeful and Sapling Stakes. His efforts netted earnings of \$129,805 for the year and also earned him the crown of champion 2-year-old male at season's end—becoming the first ever Florida-bred national champion.

At three in 1956, Needles forever etched his name in

coax Needles into a scheduled trip around the oval. Much to everyone's dismay, he loudly protested the prompting with kicks and bucks—opting instead to pick up the pace when *he* deemed it necessary.

On raceday, though, Needles was all business. With Dudley and Heath in attendance, along with 100 proud friends, family members and local breeders, that year's Kentucky Derby—thanks to Needles—proved momentous for Florida's Thoroughbred industry.

“He was the type of horse that made you play by his rules.”

—Dave Erb

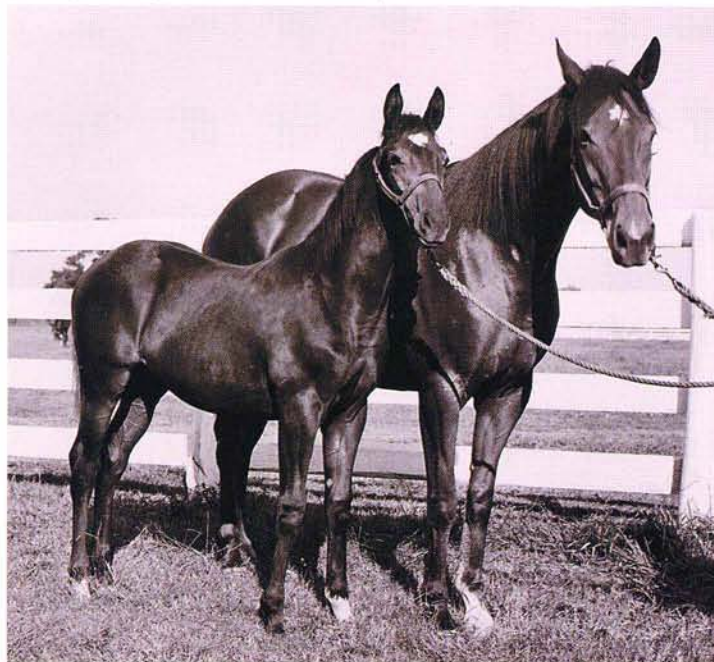
The largest crowd in Derby history—some 100,000 strong—installed Needles as the race favorite despite his training antics and the fact that he was the first Florida-bred in history to even compete in the Run for the Roses. In typical dramatic fashion, Needles justified his favoritism. Under a patient ride from Erb, Needles stormed from next-to-last in the 17-horse field, making up nearly 25 lengths in the stretch to catch Calumet Farm's Fabius in deep stretch. Needles won the 82nd running of the Derby going away, defeating Fabius by three-quarters of a length.

“He was such a fresh horse in the Derby that he gave us all a scare dropping as far out of it as he did,” Erb said. “He had a terrible work the week before the Derby so my only real concern at that point was his fitness. At the break he wanted to run with the leaders but I was fighting him trying to get him to relax. When I finally got him to relax he dropped completely out of it. He probably wasn't even at his best that day but he was good enough to win.

“He was the type of horse that made you play by his rules,” Erb added. “I think I fit him well just because I had patience with him. So many riders didn't want to sit and wait on him. But I learned how to negotiate with him.”

The first man that taught Needles about negotiating was Buddy Yates, who broke the colt as a youngster.

“During Derby week I was working in a barn near where Needles was stabled,” recalled Yates. “They were having so much trouble getting him to and from the racetrack that week that



**NEEDLES as a
youngster with
his dam,
NOODLE SOUP.**

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I didn't tell anyone that I was the man who broke him. But on Derby day I was screaming as loud as anyone for him to win.

"He must have developed his attitude after he left our farm," he added. "He didn't appear to be a star right off the bat. He was just another young horse at the farm."

Obviously, Needles grew to be much more than just 'another horse.' His Kentucky Derby victory focused, for the first time, national attention on Florida's breeding program. And Heath and Dudley were in the middle of it all.

"I didn't realize we had won the Derby until he crossed the wire," Heath admitted. "It wasn't until two jumps past the wire that I knew we had won the Derby. Of course we were confident going into the race.

"When Needles hit the wire he started gawking and looking around," he remembered. "He figured his work was done and it was time to start playing again."

Despite another courageous effort two weeks later, Needles lost a heartbreaker to Fabius in the Preakness. Again, some 20 lengths behind the pace-setters down the backstretch, Needles was simply left with too much ground to make up over Pimlico's speed-favoring surface.

A passage from the 1957 American Racing Manual aptly summed up Needles' courageous Preakness stretch drive. "So determined was Needles that he gripped the bit between his teeth and his head shook with each stride as he hit the ground."

Although he had turned in another near heroic effort, Needles lost the race by a length-and three-quarters—a mere couple of strides that would ultimately cost him the Triple Crown.

"Because he was only as fit as he would allow us to get him, he wasn't ready for the Preakness," Erb said. "He ran a good race, he simply wasn't fit enough. There is no doubt in my mind that Needles would have been a Triple Crown winner if he had been fit. And that's not taking anything away from Mr. Fontaine. Needles wouldn't let us get him as fit as he needed to be."

In a near repeat of his spectacular Derby effort, Needles avenged his Preakness loss in the Belmont Stakes. Making up 26 lengths in the last half of the race, Needles swept to another impressive victory on a hot afternoon at Belmont Park, defeating Career Boy and Fabius in the final leg of the Triple Crown.

"Of course we thought he'd win the Belmont too," said Heath. "He was certainly a very special horse. He was a winner. He had an unbelievable burst of speed."

Jack Dudley's son, Scott, harbors fond memories of Needles and the champion's unique personality.

"He was a great race-horse," Scott said. "He was one of the rare horses who could win at six furlongs and at a mile-and-a-half. Some people will tell you he didn't like to train, but he just liked to stand at the gap and watch horses gallop. He definitely had a mind of his own. He was never in a hurry to get back to the barn. He just enjoyed watching other horses."

All told at three, Needles won half of his eight appearances, placed in two others and bankrolled \$440,850. In addition to his victories in the Kentucky Derby and Belmont Stakes, Needles also swept the Flamingo Stakes and the Florida Derby, setting a track record in the latter. Again, Needles was honored with the nation's best as he was crowned champion 3-year-old male.



DICKEY and WILLIAM LEACH bred NEEDLES in Florida at Dickey Stables.

**"He is my all-time favorite horse.
I will forever feel a close attachment to him."
—Dr. Brawner**

An injury abbreviated his 4-year-old year in 1957 and Florida's most famous Thoroughbred retired to stud. He toted with him earnings of \$600,355, three track records and 11 victories from 21 career starts. Despite attractive offers to stand Needles at stud in Kentucky, Dudley and Heath, committed to the area's potential, kept Needles in his native Florida for stud duty and the state's first champion took up residence at Bonnie Heath Farm.

"Our belief in Florida is what kept him here," Heath said. "If we had surrendered the horse to Kentucky he would have done very well. But we never regretted standing him here. He was the horse

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that lit the fire in Florida.”

A leading juvenile sire in 1964, Needles’ stallion career lasted through age 25. He sired 20 crops and boasted 234 winners and 21 stakes winners. His total progeny earnings amounted to \$6,230,259.

“When they made the decision to stand him in Florida, I don’t think they had any idea of the impact that he would have on the state’s breeding industry,” said Diane Dudley, Scott’s wife, and a member of the Board of Directors of the Florida Thoroughbred Breeders’ and Owners’ Association. “Needles was the founding father of the Florida breeding industry.

“Needles would not even have lived if it were not for the work of Dr. Reuben Brawner,” Diane continued. “Needles was such a sickly foal that Dr. Brawner literally saved his life. That’s actually how Needles received his name—from all the shots he was given as a foal.”

“I know both of our families are thrilled with this honor. And I know Jack Dudley is smiling down on us all.”
—Bonnie Heath III

Pneumonia threatened Needles’ life as a three month old. It was the work of Dr. Brawner and Dickey Leach, William’s wife, that preserved his life.

“The nice thing about Needles was that he was tough,” said Dr. Brawner. “He never stopped eating, never lost weight and he was always bright. Even then, he would try to kick you even though he was sick.

“Some foals when they get sick they will give up on you,” he continued. “Needles was never like that. I believe horses are a lot like people in that respect. There are people that get diagnosed with illnesses and they believe they can whip anything. Needles possessed that quality. He knew he could whip anything.”

Dr. Brawner looked after Needles until the colt was sold to Dudley and Heath at age two. Following Needles’ racing career, Dr. Brawner again was his veterinarian when he returned to the area to stand at Bonnie Heath Farm.

“Years after I took care of him through his illness he still remembered me,” said Dr. Brawner. “As a stallion he would never let me catch him—not even in his stall. He would put his head down in a

corner and stand with his legs out ready to kick me. He didn’t want to have anything to do with me because I guess he figured I was always going to do something to him.

“He was my all-time favorite horse,” Dr. Brawner declared. “I will forever feel a close attachment to him.”

Needles braved his illnesses as a foal and went on to brave many a rival on the racetrack in the afternoon. The incredible and lasting contributions of his accomplishments were, for years, the lifeblood of Florida’s thriving Thoroughbred industry.

Needles succumbed to a heart attack at the age of 31 in 1984.

“The infirmities of old age caught up with him,” Dr. Brawner said. “He was getting a little sluggish as he grew older. But he was always healthy throughout his life.”

The May Hall of Fame announcement was important to the Heath and Dudley families. More importantly, it was deserved. Unfortunately, Jack Dudley never was able to celebrate the overdue honor with his family and friends as he passed away more than a year ago.

There are others responsible for orchestrating Needles’ career that will also miss out on the Saratoga Springs festivities. His trainer, Hugh Fontaine, has passed away as has Needles’ tall, lanky groom Jack Rutter who kept a watchful eye over his charge around the clock. And then there was Boots the cat, Needles’ faithful stable companion who traveled everywhere with him.

As for Florida’s proudest son—immortality awaits.

“I know both of our families are thrilled with this honor,” said Heath, III. “And I know Jack Dudley is smiling down on us all.”

So, too, are Needles and a few other people who helped ignite and maintain his brilliant racing career—which in turn sparked a treasured industry in Marion County. An industry that still today continues to add glorious chapters to the story Needles began scripting 45 years ago.

Editor’s note: Needles joins seven other Florida-breds in the Hall of Fame. The names of the others and the year they were inducted are: Affirmed (1980), Carry Back (1975), Desert Vixen (1979), Dr. Fager (1971), Foolish Pleasure (1995), Susan’s Girl (1976), and Ta Wee (1994).

Facing page:
A painting by Bob Judy depicting Needles and his favorite stable companion, Boots.

